

The Educational and Civic Leadership of Elsie Wilcox, 1920-1932

Judith Dean Gething

INTRODUCTION

Hawaii in the 1920s was an exotic outpost of America. The majority of the population was of Asian ancestry; the food, housing, clothing and religion of much of the population was more eastern than western. Buddhist temples, hula dancers, and sugar plantations gave the islands a distinctly foreign flavor; yet, running through this combination of Asian and Polynesian was a strong strain of New England traditions, values, and institutions.

Out of this strange mixture, from an isolated community on the island of Kauai, a woman emerged to become one of the leading forces in Hawaii in education, social work, philanthropy, Christian action, internationalism, and, later, politics. Elsie Wilcox would have been remarkable in any time and any place, but she is all the more unusual because of her time and place.

The years covered in this article, 1920-1932, coincide with Miss Wilcox's tenure as Commissioner for Education from Kauai. She reached the zenith of her career in public and community service beginning with her appointment as Commissioner and continuing through eight years as a Senator from Kauai in the Territorial Senate between 1932 and 1940. She was the first woman to serve in that body. The period 1920-1932 also coincides with the post-World War I era in which an outspoken Progressive and internationalist such as Miss Wilcox could believe in the possibility of peace, progress, and prosperity

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and could act to further those goals in Hawaii and the Pacific. By 1932 many hopes for peace and prosperity were dimming, as the Great Depression spread to Hawaii and peace in the Pacific was threatened by political turmoil in China and the expansionist plans of Japan. This study focuses on how and why Elsie Wilcox played such a prominent role in the Territory of Hawaii during the 1920s and early 1930s.

The primary resources used here are at Grove Farm Museum on Kauai, where all of the papers of the Wilcox family are housed. There are thousands of letters, including household records, personal correspondence, and letters relating to the activities of Miss Wilcox in church, charitable, YMCA/YWCA, missionary, internationalist, and peace organizations.

Unfortunately, there are almost no letters concerning her work as Commissioner for Education (1930-32) or as Territorial Senator (1932-40). It is not known whether the letters have been lost or destroyed, or if there was little correspondence related to either of those posts. The latter proposition seems unlikely but it is a possibility. In any event, her correspondence has been supplemented, particularly in the sections on education and Americanization, with other sources that help give the setting for the controversies in which she was involved. Several people who knew Miss Wilcox were interviewed, but most of their recollections relate to the 1930s and 1940s and will be more helpful in a later study of her political career.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Elsie Wilcox was born in 1879, the third of six children of Samuel and Emma Lyman Wilcox. Her birthplace, Grove Farm Plantation near Lihue, Kauai, remained her home for her entire life, and she died there at the age of 74 in 1954.

Her grandparents were Congregational missionaries to Hawaii. Her father's parents, Abner and Lucy Wilcox, spent most of their lives in Hanalei, Kauai, where Abner was a teacher. Like many missionaries, they were prolific letter writers, and the letters, collected in *Letters from the Life of Abner and Lucy Wilcox*,¹ give many insights into their long, often hard, sometimes rewarding lives. Elsie's mother's parents, David and Sarah Lyman, came to Hawaii in 1832 and soon were sent to Hilo where they too established a school and raised a large family. As was true of most of the missionary families, the themes of devotion, hard work, poverty, and a life-long dedication to the work of the mission run through the Lyman's letters.

The missionary tradition clearly played an important role in determining the values which guided Elsie Wilcox's life. Most of the traits associated with Puritan New England and with the Christian missionaries reappear in her. Foremost was a passionate devotion to education, her own and others as well. To further her own education, throughout her life she took correspondence courses, read in a wide variety of fields, studied music, and corresponded regularly with scholars such as Romanzo Adams and Stanley Porteus at the University of Hawaii. While her grandparents' interest in education was principally associated with teaching people to read so that they could read the Bible, Miss Wilcox combined this religious impulse with a deep concern for good citizenship. She also retained the high value her forebears had placed on hard work and service to the community.

Another factor which contributed to the life of public service Elsie Wilcox chose was the wealth provided her by Grove Farm Plantation. The plantation was created by her uncle, G. N. Wilcox, one of the most prominent business and political leaders in the Kingdom and Territory of Hawaii. Personal income from the plantation freed her of the necessity of earning a living, although starting about 1920 she gradually took over the management of a sizeable household from her mother. Despite her duties at home, she had ample time for civic activities.

Without the strong Christian impulse for service inherited from her grandparents, and without the freedom from economic concerns provided by her uncle, she probably would have had neither the impetus nor the means to devote her life to public service. Wealth alone led many of her generation in other directions, a description of which is found in a story about part of the Judd family, *The Wilders of Waikiki*.² Without wealth, which provided her freedom from earning a living, she might have been a paid social worker or educator. She worked in both fields much of her adult life without pay.

That she remained single was also important. After being taught by a private tutor, Miss Wilcox attended Punahou and Wellesley College. She returned from college to a very narrow society which severely limited the selection of a mate. She taught school for two years and seems then to have settled into the typical pattern of similar women her age—attending parties, playing cards, taking trips to Honolulu and the mainland.

She also went to Europe and in 1907 toured China with her sister, Mabel, and their uncle, G. N. Wilcox. This travel contributed significantly to her later activities. She had seen Europe before World War I. Her sister, Mabel, served as a nurse in France and Belgium during the

war and brought back stories of the horror that had befallen Europe. Elsie Wilcox's internationalist and peace activities grew out of these experiences, just as her abiding interest in the China mission came from her travel there.

Gradually, certain elements of her personality came to the fore. While most of her peers married and started families, she became increasingly involved in various community activities. This was a slow process, but by about 1920 it had become the dominant theme in her life. In this regard, she had a few models, including Jane Addams and Lillian Wald, pioneer social worker and public health nurse respectively. Elsie Wilcox was interested in the work of Addams and assisted in making arrangements for her when she came to Hawaii for a conference in 1928. Also, there were several active, single women in the Wilcox circle of friends, including her sister Mabel, the first public health nurse on Kauai, and Ethel Damon, the author.

Elsie Wilcox appears somewhat forbidding and stern in photographs of the time, quite like missionaries of previous generations, but people who knew her generally remarked that she had an excellent sense of humor and sharp wit. Quotes from her correspondence, some of which are included in this article, indicate that she was exceptionally kind and thoughtful in her dealings with a wide range of people. She seemed able to bridge the gap between the élite families and other people, a gap mentioned, for example, by Lawrence Fuchs.³ She and Bernice Hundley, the supervising principal for Kauai, were good friends, and Miss Wilcox often entertained teachers at her home. In a society in which race made a difference, it seems to have made less to her than to many other Caucasians. In connection with the schools, Miss Hundley said of her, "I can think of no occasion when she suggested discrimination because of racial ancestry, religion nor political affiliation."⁴ There was none of the dominance or arrogance sometimes associated with great wealth and position. She was, if anything, often quite humble about her abilities and the contributions she felt she was able to make.

What her correspondence shows most clearly is her professionalism and the respect it engendered from other professionals. Here was no dabbler or dilettante. What she did, she did well, and when she felt she did not have the necessary skills to perform a task she took a course, sought expert assistance, or declined to accept it with the explanation that she lacked the necessary expertise. With growing regularity, church, YWCA, YMCA, social work, education, and internationalist leaders came to her for counsel, not just about what to do on Kauai but on much larger questions as well.

She had a deep sense of family and community and was concerned throughout her life with preservation of buildings, traditions, and documents. She and other members of her family restored the Waioli home of her paternal grandparents in 1921 and the Hilo home of her maternal grandparents in 1931. She collected Hawaiian books and artifacts, many of which are on display at the Grove Farm Museum. In addition, she was one of the founders of the Kauai Historical Society.

By 1920 she was actively involved in creating a lively intellectual community in Lihue, which then had a population of about 3,000. She applied her substantial wealth and growing organizational expertise to specific areas that were of concern to her, nurturing these areas like a gardener tending a promising plot of land. A significant part of her intellectual community was the Mokihana Club of which she was one of eight founders. This small club of prominent Kauai women, primarily but not entirely Caucasians, sponsored talks and presentations by visiting musicians, scientists, historians, artists, economists, anthropologists, politicians, and writers, in addition to supporting and encouraging the talents of local experts. Visitors who were to speak to the Mokihana Club were often housed at Grove Farm, in lieu of the small hotel in Lihue. Thus, there were many dinner parties with time to relax on the lanai and talk informally. The Wilcox hospitality was typical of the time in Hawaii—always ready and generous. The Mokihana Club provided cultural and intellectual enlightenment that, if not unique, was certainly unusual in a place as small and remote as Kauai in the 1920s.

The Mokihana Club was not the only vehicle for the creation of the community Elsie Wilcox built around Grove Farm. The rest of this article outlines the many other activities in which she participated and some of the people whose lives she touched from her base at Grove Farm.

In 1920, at the age of 41, she was appointed Commissioner of Education for Kauai. The Commissioners were the governing board of the Territorial Department of Public Instruction (DPI). As a member of the Commission, Elsie Wilcox was thrust into the center of a turbulent conflict over the quality and quantity of education the public school system should provide the children of the Territory. To understand the nature of the conflict, some background information is necessary. This background is also helpful in understanding most of Miss Wilcox's other endeavors.

EDUCATION

After Hawaii became a territory of the United States in 1900, the owners of the plantations again turned their attention to the difficulty

which had plagued them since the creation of the plantations. Many technological problems had been overcome and large areas of land had gradually been consolidated, creating the scale necessary for economic development of the sugar industry. The continuing problem was an adequate supply of labor: the whole plantation system depended upon large numbers of laborers.

Originally, the developing plantations had employed Hawaiians, but it rapidly became apparent that other sources of labor would have to be found. The Hawaiian population had been depleted by diseases brought to the islands by foreigners, and most of the remaining Hawaiians were not willing to work on the plantations at the wages offered. By far the largest supply of labor eventually came from Asia. In 1860 there were 816 Chinese and no other Asians in the Kingdom of Hawaii. In 1920 there were 109,274 Japanese, 23,507 Chinese, 4,950 Koreans, and 21,031 Filipinos in the Territory of Hawaii, most of them brought to work on the plantations. In 1920 the Japanese made up 42.7% of the population; and the Japanese, Chinese, Koreans, and Filipinos, comprised more than half the population of the Territory.⁵

The hope and expectation of the plantation owners was that the workers would stay five or ten years and then return to their home countries. Many did. However, large numbers served out their contracts and then either remained with the plantations or started their own small farms or businesses, moving away from plantation employment. The impact of the immigrants' remaining in the Territory on the public school system was dramatic. By 1919 children of Japanese immigrants constituted 38% of the public school population, Chinese 8%, and Koreans 1%; and the percentages were clearly bound to rise as the picture brides of the 1910s continued to have large families.⁶

Thus, the decade of the 1920s saw Hawaii in the midst of a classic race and class struggle in which the tension between two fundamental American principles—capitalism and democracy—was clearly brought into focus. The statistics explain the basic reason for the struggle and also provide a clue as to the outcome, although it was not manifest until the 1950s when children of the immigrants became the dominant political force in the Territory. Most of the history of the 1920s and 1930s, as far as education and Elsie Wilcox's other activities were concerned, centers on those figures.

A study of the Territorial public schools conducted in 1920 by the United States Office of Education, *Survey of Education in Hawaii*,⁷ became Elsie Wilcox's touchstone for educational change. The survey called for free public kindergartens, expanded junior and senior high

schools, improved facilities at all levels, better pay for teachers, expanded vocational education programs, and a change in the policy of failing a high percentage of high school students during the first year in order to reduce the number of students who continued their education. The survey team members did not attach a price tag to their recommendations, but clearly they would be expensive to implement and, hence, they were the subject of bitter debate during the decade.

Using the *Survey* as the foundation of her position, Miss Wilcox spoke out in favor of almost all of its recommendations because she believed that only through education could a representative democracy be maintained. She considered herself a Progressive and, indeed, cited John Dewey so often to the effect that "what the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, most of the community wants for all its children,"⁸ that Bernice Hundley quoted it in an obituary she wrote at Elsie Wilcox's death.⁹

In the Commission for Education Miss Wilcox voted for increased appropriations, better conditions for teachers, more schools, and expanded kindergartens. In her public statements and private correspondence she was one of the strongest advocates of the public school system in the Territory.

In addition, and of considerable importance, she provided visible support for the teachers and students by attending students' speech contests and fairs, touring schools, meeting with administrators and hosting social activities for teachers. She was also very active in various education groups. She was a member of the Kauai Principal's Association and chaired the Kauai Public School Athletic League. As a member of one of the four or five leading families in the small community of Kauai and of perhaps two dozen families in the islands, her support for the public schools was significant.

If Wilcox was representative of the democratic side of the argument in the 1920s, R. A. Cooke, President of the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association (HSPA) and another missionary descendant, articulated the capitalist view when he said, "As has been emphasized again and again, the primary function of our plantations is not to produce sugar but to pay dividends."¹⁰ To do that, the plantations needed cheap labor. The plantation owners looked on the immigrant laborers as the answer to this need. The United States Commissioner of Labor Statistics summed up this position in 1916 saying:

Plantations have to view laborers primarily as instruments of production. Their business interests require cheap, not too intelligent, docile unmarried men. . . . Though nearly everyone in Hawaii recognizes that labor questions there cannot be handled solely from

the standpoint of cheap production, this consideration dominates every practical labor policy. . . . The interests of those who are bent upon making present profits are inevitably more or less antagonistic to the highest civic and economic development of the islands.¹¹

Earlier, Royal Mead of the HSPA had said:

Up to the present time the Asiatic has had only an economic value in the social equation. So far as the institutions, laws, customs and language of the permanent population go, his presence is no more felt than is that of the cattle on the ranges.¹²

There is evidence that many of the owners took a great deal of care with their laborers, knew them personally, and, within the mores of the time, provided for them far more generously than under most comparable systems in the world.¹³ However, the laborers remained basically an economic component in the equation. They would not have been brought to Hawaii had that not been the case.

Many of the planters continued to treat the laborers primarily as an economic asset long after it was sensible to do so. Cooke expressed this view saying, "I can see little difference between the importation of foreign laborers and the importation of jute bags from India."¹⁴ In addition to being an infelicitious remark, his statement is an example of the myopia that Elsie Wilcox faced in her efforts to expand the Territory's educational system. Unlike jute bags, many of the immigrants married and had children, and those children, born in the Territory, were citizens of the United States and of Hawaii. At the age of 21 they would be voters.

The planters objected to educating the children of the Asian immigrants more than was absolutely necessary for two reasons. First, education was expensive and the planters were paying for most of it through personal and corporate taxes. Most of their own children went to private schools, so they did not receive much benefit from the public school system. Second, the owners feared, and rightly so, that if the children of the plantation workers became well educated they would be unwilling to do the kind of work their parents had done, particularly at the wages their parents were paid.

While Elsie Wilcox welcomed the 1920 *Survey* and used it as a guide through the 1920s, many of the business leaders were displeased both by the substance of the recommendations and by the cost they implied. In 1925, for instance, an HSPA spokesman argued:

The alarming increase of our budget for public instruction, certainly calls for some pronounced measure to get it down to a more practical and business basis, a basis conforming nearer to what the people really need, and what the country can reasonably support. To accomplish this, it will undoubtedly be necessary to have the interest,

cooperation and assistance of some of our practical, conservative men, rather than depending too much on men who, by their training and devotion to learning, have become unduly idealist and hence extravagant. These conditions cannot be permitted to continue, and the sooner education is looked upon more in the light of a business matter, rather than a glorified means of establishing a special class of visionary high-brows, the better.¹⁵

In 1931 another extensive survey of education was conducted, but this time it was done by a group of local citizens with the assistance of a mainland expert, Charles Prosser, whose services were paid for by the Chamber of Commerce. The executive committee of the Governor's Advisory Committee on Education reads like a who's who in the islands: F. C. Atherton, R. A. Cooke, A. L. Dean, J. D. Dole, and Walter Dillingham, among others.¹⁶

Not surprisingly, the final report recognized many educational needs, but stressed the financial plight of the Territory and concluded that larger sums of money could not be spent on education in the near future and that the system should adjust to that fact.

The committee also said that the goals of the schools and the goals of the economy, which was predominantly agricultural, were at cross purposes. The schools were trying to educate too many children for non-agricultural, white collar jobs which did not exist, leading to expectations that could not be fulfilled.

. . . Many parents seem to rely on the hope that by spending many years in school their children will automatically gain both high social and high economic standing. The Committee believes that these hopes of the schools and the parents have not been realized, and we see no grounds for the belief that they will be realized in the future. We feel that the continuation or expansion of such a scheme of schooling will lead great numbers of youth to build up ambitions and aspirations which are predestined to frustration.¹⁷

On the other hand, the principal of McKinley High School, Miles Carey, took a rather jaundiced view of the complaints from prominent members of the community about the cost of public education, commenting that, "The uproar about cost of education really hides the social conditions—those in favorable positions are not interested in seeing their circle entered by young people of the immigrant laboring class."¹⁸

In her later years as Commissioner, Elsie Wilcox fought against budget cuts recommended by the Prosser Report. Despite the fact that most of the people who had been influential in recommending these reductions were her "cousins," that is, missionary descendants like herself, she bitterly denounced their shortsightedness. Finally, in 1931, when the Commission was under tremendous pressure to reduce the

number of teachers and their pay, she and the Superintendent of Education were the only members of the Commission to vote against both proposals.¹⁹ Regarding the slashes, she said "If you want to wreck the school systems, go ahead and pass this resolution," a statement which brought her several grateful letters from teachers and parents, despite the fact that the Commission did pass the resolution.²⁰ This was her swan song on the Commission. In 1932 she was elected to the Territorial Senate where she continued her fight to upgrade the schools throughout her eight years in that post.

AMERICANIZATION

Many of Elsie Wilcox's other activities between 1920 and 1932 were directly related to the problems of coping with the large immigrant population. A major issue in which she became involved, both on the Commission and through her community work, was the "Americanization" of the children of immigrant workers, particularly those of Japanese background since they constituted by far the largest percentage of immigrant children. The Americanizers believed that, for the good of the community as well as the good of the children, the children had to be made into Americans. This was no easy task, for several studies found that the children were more oriented towards Japanese culture than American culture. They spoke the Japanese language at home with their families, with their peers, and at Japanese language schools.²¹ They ate rice and drank tea. They were taught to venerate the Emperor of Japan. Their poverty was increased by the family's sending money "home" to Japan. The traditional American pattern of assimilation of children of aliens did not seem possible because there were so few children with American backgrounds compared with the numbers of children with Asian backgrounds in the public schools. Americanization took several forms, but the most controversial was a move to eliminate or control the Japanese language schools, a move in which Elsie Wilcox played an important role.

The language schools had their genesis in much the same problem that had confronted the early Christian missionaries to Hawaii. Like the missionaries, many of the Japanese worried about the education their children would receive in the local schools. They wanted their children to know the language and culture of Japan. As the missionaries solved their problem by founding Oahu College (Punahou School) so the Japanese began their own schools. At first the schools were run by Christians brought from Japan by the plantations. Soon, however, many of them were supported by the Buddhist communities here and in Japan.

The language schools came under attack for three reasons. First, they seemed to be sapping much of the energy of the children, particularly the young children, leaving too little for the American schools. Many of the children got up at 4:00 a.m. to attend the language school or stayed after regular school for a couple of hours to do their language work. Second, most of the children spoke very poor English. They heard little if any at home and very little that was standard from their friends either at home or at school. Attending a class to learn Japanese when they could scarcely communicate in proper English seemed counterproductive. A teacher questioned by the 1920 survey committee said, "Whenever a child is asked a question, he answers to himself in Japanese and then translates it into English, giving his answer. If Japanese is essential for commercial purposes, let it be taught in the high schools."²²

Finally, and probably most importantly, the teachers, priests, and leaders of some Japanese language schools were quite clear about the fact that a primary goal of the schools was to inculcate Japanese values into the children. A careful study of the goals of the Japanese and American schools found that, in fact, with one exception, the goals were similar.²³ The exception, the veneration of the Emperor of Japan, was the one that concerned many of the Americanizers. Emperor worship was not only un-American, it was un-Christian. Thus, the language schools were seen as a threat, not just to the education of the children but to the very fabric of American society.

In 1920 a comprehensive piece of legislation was passed regulating the language schools in several ways.²⁴ The vehicle for the regulation was licensing of the schools, and the teachers who taught in them, by the DPI. As with the controversy on the cost of the public school system, Elsie Wilcox was immediately caught up in the Americanization controversy as soon as she joined the Commission.

Many people in the Japanese community were incensed by the regulations the DPI developed, and it should be noted here that Elsie Wilcox either moved or seconded most of these proposals because she was a strong advocate of Americanization. The Japanese Consul, Mr. Yada, said that 90% of the teachers would fail the exams the DPI proposed and that 30-40% would not even take them for fear of failure.²⁵ The Commissioners gave way a little but basically retained the strict testing procedures they had initially proposed.²⁶ In March, 1923 it was brought to the attention of the Commissioners that some teachers were teaching without a license, and the Commission moved to have the schools ordered to show cause why they should not lose their licenses and be closed.²⁷ After protracted litigation in the territorial and federal

courts, the United States Supreme Court held all of the Territory's laws regarding the language schools unconstitutional.²⁸

Toward the end of the decade the fear of the language schools and the drive for Americanization seem to have diminished, and the Wilcox correspondence indicates a rapid drop in concern about these issues. However, while Americanization was an important matter in the Territory, Miss Wilcox pursued it not only through the DPI but in several other ways as well.

YMCA/YWCA

Elsie Wilcox probably would have been active in the YMCA and the YWCA even if she had not been interested in Americanization. Many of the members of her family had supported the Y movement, and her uncle had been particularly generous with Y activities. However, the Ys were among the major Americanization organizations in the early 1920s, and, therefore, it was natural that she should devote much of her time and talent to those groups. She had several good friends in the Ys and helped them with their Americanization efforts in various ways. She shared information with them, wrote for advice on what to do on Kauai, and consulted with them on their problems. One of her recommendations, for example, to her good friend Neil Locke, was that the Y start a newspaper for Filipino boys to help them with their English.

In support of the Y's Americanization efforts Miss Wilcox judged speech contests, went on camping trips for girls, and talked to the youngsters about various social and scientific subjects. One of the talks she was asked to give was "After school—what?" because, as the Y leader who invited her said, "You have such a good understanding of what these girls are going to face in real life when they leave school."²⁹

Closely related to this kind of effort, and in line with her interest in missionaries in Asia, was her suggestion that a man be brought from Japan to be trained by Y workers in Hawaii so that he could return to Japan and aid the Y effort there. In 1926 Locke wrote her:

Word from Watada [the Y leader on Kauai] *joyfully* announces that the fulfillment of his dream for training a man to start the work in the villages of Japan, has been made possible by the same "Friend" who has made so many things come to pass in regard to our work.

What little prophetic ability I have, makes me believe that this can be listed among the foremost of your enterprises as regards far reaching results for good.³⁰

In her typically restrained manner she wrote to Locke, "I think Watada and I 'cooked it up' originally after his return from Japan, but

I have never heard it discussed pro or con to any extent. You won't hurt my feelings if you think it wiser not to do it."³¹

The man who came from Japan, Mr. Kuba, proved to be a real success. He learned rapidly, was well liked, and generally more than met their expectations. Elsie Wilcox became very fond of him and evidently spent quite a bit of time with him, including visiting him in the hospital when he became ill. She was so impressed with his work that she arranged to send him to California for further training before he returned to Japan.

There are very few letters in which Miss Wilcox voiced criticism of a person or group in the 13 years of correspondence reviewed here. One concerns Neil Locke who had worked for the YMCA on Kauai and then had been promoted to a post in Honolulu. In 1931 he had a dispute with the Executive Director of the YMCA and was discharged. The Executive Director subsequently wrote Miss Wilcox about the family's monetary contribution which was late in arriving, and she wrote back:

One sometimes wonders what to say when an organization throws out one's friends whom one knows to be invaluable in its work. Reiterations of claims of greater efficiency do not make up in any way for one's disappointment, regret and shame that such things can happen in a Christian organization. I am slow to condemn or criticize, but we have held off our money to show in some degree what our feeling towards your organization now is. Today I send you the amount pledged but I cannot give any assurance of a return of this amount for next year. We have lots of work to do down here, too, on this little island of Kauai and perhaps our money should go here.³²

Another sharp letter had to do with a YMCA worker on Kauai. In this instance, the recipient of the letter was Norman Schenck, General Secretary of the Hawaiian Evangelical Association (HEA), who had written that he did not want the wife of one of the Congregational ministers of Kauai to work for the Y because that would detract from her duties as a minister's wife. Elsie Wilcox wrote back:

We had been somewhat surprised at the tone of your letter to Miss Hansen, and thereby indirectly to the Kauai County YWCA committee, [of which Wilcox was President] regarding the employment of Mrs. Courtezan by our Board. I understand that the Hawaiian Board is paying Mrs. Courtezan no salary and has no claim on her other than [sic] that which any church or community has upon the wife of its pastor. The day has long since gone when a woman was so much a part of her husband that she could not establish a separate individuality—and vice versa. . . .

As you know, it is almost impossible to secure good Filipino workers. We must use what is available, and it seems far and away the best thing for Mrs. Courtezan, who is a fine influence, to extend her work as far as possible. If we could easily secure someone else, you might have some argument to present, but you know from your own experience that work among the Filipinos advances slowly because [sic] of our lack of trained people speaking their languages. At present Mrs. Courtezan's work is all planned for

her, the backing of Plantation managers secured, etc., and we cannot withdraw without great detriment to the respect in which our work is held. Also, I think we ought not to withdraw when I consider the work to be done. This will be a great aid and blessing in your own Filipino work and you ought to thank the Lord that he has granted you a bit of organizing ability in Miss Edith Hanson, free gratis, by the way, to get in back of some of your work. When you come to Kauai we shall be glad to talk this over with you. For the present we must continue as we are, and I beg you not to intimidate our worker.³³

A third somewhat caustic letter also involved the YWCA. In this case, the Director of the Honolulu Y had written Miss Wilcox in dismay about the plans that the wealthy members of her Board of Directors had to move the facility out of the center of town into what was then a remote area. Elsie Wilcox wrote back a letter that was intended for the use of the Director.

I am quite surprised to hear that the Alapai Street property is even considered for the new Y.W. building. Certainly, if some of your good Board members would discard their automobiles for a short time and foot it around town in hot weather, they would soon have no taste for the walk out there and back at the noon-hour. I *walk* when I am in town, and know whereof I speak. Tired shop and office girls will be much less inclined to do it than we who are less occupied. If you want to ruin your business, move out there and let some other organization come into town and do your work for you. I thought that site was out of the question before Fernhurst was built, even. Why revive it?³⁴

The position that the YWCA should remain close to downtown prevailed—it was not moved to the Alapai location.

SOCIAL WORK

The social work that Elsie Wilcox did was related in many ways both to her Y activities and her church work outlined in the following section. By 1920 she seems to have been the acknowledged leader of the nascent social work profession on Kauai. This is particularly significant because, as she kept pointing out to people, she had no formal training in the area. She wrote to Romanzo Adams in 1921 that she was "entirely untrained in Social Work of any kind," but still was asked to be on various committees and planning groups for social work conferences that were held in the Territory during the decade.³⁵ Finally, in 1925 she took a correspondence course in the subject, but she consistently disclaimed expertise in the area. Nonetheless, Margaret Bergen, Manager of the Associated Charities in Honolulu, Margaret Catton of the Juvenile Court in Honolulu, and Nell Findley of the Social Service Bureau all corresponded with her on a regular basis about people from Kauai who were in difficulty and who had been brought to their attention.

She was appointed guardian of several children whose parents were abusive or who had abandoned them. There is long correspondence with social workers and various schools and the Salvation Army's home for unwed mothers about these children. The problems of teenage pregnancy crop up again and again in the Wilcox letters. Without contraceptives or legal abortions, many girls found themselves "in trouble" and genuinely desperate. Wilcox paid for many of the girls to go to the Wesley home in Honolulu and helped find them jobs after they gave birth.

In 1926 Clinton S. Childs, President of the Seventh Territorial Conference on Social Work wrote Elsie Wilcox about the program for the conference, saying, "As one of the leaders in Social betterment in the Territory, I would consider it a great favor if you would come to a Conference to talk over the matter of these questions."³⁶ Clearly, because of the enormous efforts she had put forth on Kauai, all of which were volunteered, she had established herself, whether she intended to or not, as *the* social worker on Kauai.

She was invited to the National Conference of Social Workers in 1929, and in 1930 she was a delegate to the White House Conference on Child Health Protection. Following that conference, she was asked by Ray Wilbur, then Secretary of the Interior, to be a member of the speakers committee to follow up the recommendations of the Conference.³⁷

In addition to the publicly visible work, she bailed people out of jail, paid hospital bills, obtained court orders for alimony, found errant husbands (and, occasionally, wives) and smoothed things out between plantation managers and troubled children.

CHURCH ACTIVITIES

Miss Wilcox's YMCA, YWCA, and social work activities were an outgrowth of her concern for the community and her Christian background. This Christian heritage found direct expression in extensive service to various church groups on Kauai, in the Territory, and throughout the world.

It is illuminating to trace the changing expressions of faith from Elsie Wilcox's grandmothers to her mother and herself. In Elsie's correspondence there is literally none of the evangelical language that appears in the previous two generations' letters, particularly those of her grandmothers. I found no reference to her own faith or beliefs. She never referred to Jesus Christ or to the work of His kingdom on earth, even when she was writing to missionaries who themselves were very much at home with such expressions. Yet, much of her time and talent

was devoted to the work of the church and to spreading Christianity among the new immigrants and in Asia.

Close to home, she was a member of Lihue Union Church located next door to Grove Farm. She served on various boards of the church, taught Sunday School teachers, and generously supported the church. She was consulted on most important matters from reroofing the building to the selection of a new minister. She was committed to her own Sunday School class, and throughout the correspondence there are letters to Honolulu asking for materials for her students and herself.

A second area in which she focused her expertise and generosity was the Hawaiian Evangelical Association, precursor of the current Hawaii Conference of the United Church of Christ. Her role in the HEA was similar to that at Lihue Union in that she served on various committees including the finance committee, and had continuing correspondence with the General Secretary about things happening in the churches on Kauai and at the Association headquarters. During this time the Congregational church had several congregations in each population area throughout the islands, essentially characterized by race. Thus, there would be a Hawaiian, a Japanese, and a "Foreign" (Caucasian) congregation in most places and sometimes a Chinese and a Filipino congregation as well. In some areas congregations used the same building but had different ministers and met at different times during the week. Elsie Wilcox seems to have been familiar with the people involved in most of the Congregational churches on Kauai, and her reaction was often sought when problems developed.

She was especially interested in the Japanese congregations and gave significant moral and economic support to them. The volume of correspondence with and about the Japanese congregations is much greater than that concerning Hawaiian congregations, and her support of Hawaiian churches was minimal by contrast with that of the Japanese churches. She did help a few Hawaiian ministers obtain needed education and sent money annually for the HEA Hawaiian language paper. Other than these two activities, however, there is very little personal, charitable, or professional contact with the Hawaiians reflected in the correspondence. This is somewhat surprising because her father seemed to be very close to many Hawaiians and spoke the language fluently, and her sister carried out her public health work in the most remote Hawaiian communities on the island.

In addition to her church work in Hawaii, Elsie Wilcox had a grand vision of spreading Christianity throughout Asia and of the benefits that would accrue to the Asians should that dream materialize. In this regard

she wrote Y. C. James Yan, General Director of Mass Education, Peiping:

I want also to congratulate you on the progress of your work in this last five year period. I am thrilled when I think of it all and realize that it is without doubt one of the great world movements underway. What it will do for China socially and economically is immense. And to the Christian cause as I have gathered from my friends from the American Board, it is giving a new way to work and a new hope for usefulness. . . . I feel that you are on the right track—demonstrating what can be done for country people under typical conditions and I realize that it was not the easiest thing to choose—but by far the wisest.³⁸

She gave assistance to specific individuals and to organizations. She provided the annual salary for several missionaries, both American and Chinese, gave to a number of mission stations, particularly to hospitals and schools, and assisted in meeting special needs. Not surprisingly, considering her own background, she was genuinely appreciative of the sacrifices the missionaries were making. In 1929 she sent money for a car for Mr. and Mrs. Frank Rowlinson in Shanghai, commenting, "Those are very rare people, too, and anything done for them is worthwhile."³⁹

Her contributions to overseas missionaries were not confined to China, although the bulk of her money went there. She contributed to evangelism in Japan and, to a lesser extent, Korea. Perhaps a significant reason for her willingness to give so much to the China mission, in addition to the interest generated by her 1926 visit to China, was the fact that the missionaries she helped there were sent by the American Board, the organization that had sponsored her grandparents' mission to Hawaii.

She was supportive of the work of the Board and had an ongoing correspondence with its director, Brewer Eddy. Particularly in the 1930s Eddy turned to her for advice and solace, as the depression devastated the income of the Board and the civil war in China destroyed decades of missionaries' work. Responding to one of his letters in 1931 and in sharp contrast to her very optimistic outlook earlier, she wrote, "One stands aghast at the poverty, unemployment, debt, ignorance, and general helplessness of the world."⁴⁰

INTERNATIONALIST ACTIVITIES

Directly related to Elsie Wilcox's deep concern about Christian missionaries in Asia was her work in the internationalist and peace movements. Hawaii in the 1920s was a hub of activity in both of these areas and it was an exciting time for the few people in the Territory who felt they were in the vanguard of world peace and understanding. Paul

Hooper has documented the remarkable burst of internationalist activity that dominated the Hawaiian scene in the 1920s.⁴¹ A handful of people galvanized Hawaii, the Pacific community and, eventually, East Coast American and European communities to focus attention on the potential the Pacific area held for bettering understanding between people of different races and countries. In 1917 the Pan Pacific Union (PPU) was founded to "bring all nations and peoples about the Pacific Ocean into closer friendly commercial contact and relationship."⁴² The Institute of Pacific Relations (IPR) started in 1925 as

a body of men and women deeply interested in the Pacific area, who meet and work, not as representatives of their Governments, or of any other organizations, but as individuals in order to promote the well-being of the peoples concerned. . . .

Its main efforts will be devoted to collecting and elucidating the facts of international significance, which, by their influence in guiding public opinion, may assist constructively, development of the countries concerned; to urging the improvement of legal and administrative procedure where present methods tend to hinder international harmony and good feeling; and directly to promoting international friendship by personal association and by the study of economic, educational, social, political, moral and religious conditions with a view to their improvement.⁴³

Elsie Wilcox was active in both the PPU and IPR, and, indeed, seems to have been one of the few people from Kauai who took much interest in either endeavor. As with the rest of her activities, her goal was clear. She believed that it was imperative to bring leading private citizens together so that they could then go back to their own countries and spread the message of understanding and peace. L. L. Wirt of the National Council for the Prevention of War wrote her, "the nineteenth century made the world a neighborhood and the twentieth century must make it a brotherhood," and she subscribed to the Council's motto as well as its work.⁴⁴

Elsie Wilcox was invited to be part of Hawaii's delegation to all of the IPR conventions and attended two of them. Unable to go to the 1929 convention in Kyoto because of the precarious health of her mother and uncle, she wrote of her vision for it, saying, "We are hoping for great things from that conference. . . . [It] should lead to much good for the understanding of nations, one with another, and the peace of the world."⁴⁵ A letter from Alexander Hume Ford, Director of the PPU, gives a sense of the standing she had in that organization. It begins, "My Dear Miss Wilcox: For you to ask is to command . . ." and goes on to say that he will follow up on her suggestions.⁴⁶ It should be noted that there is nothing in this correspondence to suggest resentment towards her efforts; rather, it is appreciation both for her support and her expertise.

Hooper maintains that the internationalist group which had the major long-term impact was the Pan Pacific Women's Association, of which Elsie Wilcox was a key member. It developed out of the PPU, but attained an identity of its own. In 1928 a conference which would cover all matters of interest to women was suggested and, as Hooper points out, the suggestion hit a very responsive cord.

Driven by enthusiasm and feminist conviction, the planners arranged for Jane Addams, then perhaps the best-known woman in America, to chair the meeting, overcame serious obstacles regarding the agenda and the choice of delegates, and prevailed upon Governor Wallace R. Farrington to persuade the Department of State to issue formal invitations to the various Pacific countries despite the fact that the conference was in no sense a governmental undertaking. As a result, when the 338 delegates and observers assembled at Punahou School in Honolulu on August 9, 1928, for the ten-day gathering, they were treated to what was probably the best prepared and publicized gathering yet to occur under Union auspices.⁴⁷

Elsie Wilcox was part of the group that planned the conference, and she hosted both this one and the one that followed it. Again, her contacts in Asia were of importance in the selection of delegates and of topics to be discussed.

It was an exciting time in Hawaii for those who were concerned about peace and good will. If retrospectively we can see their hopes were doomed to failure, the failure nonetheless does not detract from the fervor, dedication, and optimism with which Elsie Wilcox and her associates pursued their goals of world peace and understanding.

CONCLUSION

It is, in a sense, premature to write a conclusion at this point. The work for which Elsie Wilcox is best known, her service in the Territorial legislature, lay ahead of her. However, it may be appropriate to consider the years covered in this article both as a prelude to her distinguished political career and as years that were important in their own right. In that context, several tentative conclusions are set forth.

First, Elsie Wilcox had wealth, social position, a good education, and a value system that encouraged her to use these assets not just for her own enjoyment and advancement but for the good of the community, however that community was defined.

Second, because she remained single, she did not have the ongoing responsibilities of childrearing that most women had. Thus, she had the time and emotional energy which the activities described here demanded. While it was not impossible for a woman to provide leadership outside of

the home when she had children, it was certainly more difficult, as Carl Degler and Gerda Lerner, among many others, have documented.⁴⁸

Third, the endeavors that are discussed here are, in some ways, an extension of women's role in the home, that is, of educating, nurturing, protecting, and providing a peaceful, safe haven. One of the ways that women were able gradually to extend their activities outside the home was to assume roles in the community which closely paralleled those of women's sphere in the home.⁴⁹ By the time Elsie Wilcox was in her 40s that movement was well accepted, and therefore, while she was certainly much more active than any other woman in the Territory in a wide range of organizations, she was doing things which were socially and psychologically understood and accepted.

Fourth, she was in no sense a radical, despite her confrontations with various conservative "cousins." She was not active in the feminist movement, nor did she support the plantation workers in their strikes. Although she worked hard to ameliorate the abuses of the plantation system, she never challenged that system.

Finally, if her hopes for peace and the spread of Christianity in Asia were doomed, her efforts for education in the Territory did bear fruit. In retrospect, what happened seems so natural that it is easy to forget that things could have been very different. The Territory had only one generation in which to take children of Asian immigrants and make them into voters who could use the democratic process for democratic goals. Public education, the church, and the YMCA and the YWCA were among the instruments of this process. The history of Kauai, the Territory, and the State would probably have been different if it were not for Elsie Wilcox who, against the strong resistance of many of her peers, spent most of these years working for her vision of what Hawaii could be.

NOTES

¹ Ethel M. Damon, ed., *Letters from the Life of Abner and Lucy Wilcox* (Honolulu: privately printed, 1950).

² Kinau Wilder, *Wilders of Waikiki* (Honolulu: Topgallant Pub. Co., 1978).

³ Lawrence H. Fuchs, *Hawaii Pono: A Social History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1961), p. 61.

⁴ Bernice Hundley, "Thank you, Miss Elsie Wilcox," *Garden Island*, 21 July 1954.

⁵ Andrew W. Lind, *Hawaii's People* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1967), p. 28.

⁶ Floy T. Gay, "A Study of the Development of the Senior High Schools," M.A. thesis University of Hawaii 1945, p. 11.

- ⁷ U.S. Dept. of Interior, U.S. Office of Education, *Survey of Education in Hawaii* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1920), hereafter cited as *1920 Survey*.
- ⁸ John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1900), p. 3.
- ⁹ Hundley, "Thank you".
- ¹⁰ *Proceedings of the Forty-Ninth Annual Meeting of the HSPA* (Honolulu: Star Bulletin, 1930), p. 8.
- ¹¹ "Labor Conditions in Hawaii," Letter from the Secretary of Labor, Fifth Annual Report of the Commissioner of Labor Statistics, Sen. Doc. No. 432, 64th Cong., 1st Sess., 1916, p. 40.
- ¹² Royal D. Mead, "The Sugar Industry in Hawaii," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 July 1910. Quoted in "Labor Organization in Hawaii: A Study of Efforts of Labor to Obtain Security Through Organization," Richard A. Liebes, M.A. thesis University of Hawaii 1938, p. 74.
- ¹³ Fuchs, *Hawaii Pono*, p. 48.
- ¹⁴ Liebes, "Labor Organization," p. 75.
- ¹⁵ Gay, "A Study of the Development of the Senior High Schools," p. 57.
- ¹⁶ Governor's Advisory Committee on Education, *Survey of Schools and Industry* (Honolulu: Printshop Co., 1931), pp. 8-9.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ¹⁸ Gordon C. Sato, "Hawaii's Public Schools: A Primary Agency for Behavioral Assimilation 1920-1940," M.Ed. thesis University of Hawaii 1973, p. 32.
- ¹⁹ Minutes of the Commission for Education, Vol. III, 11 December 1931, p. 22, AH (hereafter cited as Commission Minutes).
- ²⁰ Letter, S. Sakai to Elsie Wilcox, 16 December 1931, Elsie H. Wilcox Papers, Grove Farm Homestead. All letters cited below are from this collection.
- ²¹ *1920 Survey*, pp. 37, 129.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p. 130.
- ²³ Sato, "Hawaii's Public Schools," pp. 42-44.
- ²⁴ Act 30, Special Session, 1920, Legislature of Hawaii.
- ²⁵ Commission Minutes, Vol. I, 9 March 1921, p. 67.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 12 March 1923, pp. 138-139.
- ²⁸ *Farrington v. Tokushige* 273 U.S. 284 (1926).
- ²⁹ Letter, Esther May Carter to Elsie Wilcox, 8 May 1930.
- ³⁰ Letter, Neil Locke to Elsie Wilcox, 28 September 1926.
- ³¹ Letter, Elsie Wilcox to Neil Locke, 10 March 1928.
- ³² Letter, Elsie Wilcox to Merle Scott, 13 September 1930.
- ³³ Letter, Elsie Wilcox to Norman Schenck, 21 September 1926.
- ³⁴ Letter, Elsie Wilcox to Miss Channon, 5 February 1921.
- ³⁵ Letter, Elsie Wilcox to Romanzo Adams, 21 March 1921.
- ³⁶ Letter, Clinton Childs to Elsie Wilcox, 22 June 1926.
- ³⁷ Letter, Ray Wilbur to Elsie Wilcox, 1 April 1931.
- ³⁸ Letter, Elsie Wilcox to Y. C. Yan, 11 April 1931.
- ³⁹ Letter, Elsie Wilcox to Frank Atherton, 8 February 1929.
- ⁴⁰ Letter, Elsie Wilcox to Brewer Eddy, 4 August 1931.

- ⁴¹ Paul F. Hooper, *Elusive Destiny: The Internationalist Movement in Modern Hawaii* (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1980).
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 80.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 111–112.
- ⁴⁴ Letter, L. W. Wirt to Elsie Wilcox, 26 July 1927.
- ⁴⁵ Letter, Elsie Wilcox to Neander Chang, 8 October 1929.
- ⁴⁶ Letter, A. H. Ford to Elsie Wilcox, 19 September 1928.
- ⁴⁷ Hooper, *Elusive Destiny*, p. 91.
- ⁴⁸ Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- ⁴⁹ Degler, *At Odds*, pp. 298–328.